DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 936 FL 019 426

AUTHOR Benander, Ruth
TITLE Cultural Expression in Speech Behavior: Methods of Inquiry.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 10p.; In: Penn Working Papers in Educational Linguistics, Volume 6, Number 2; see FL 019 424.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; *Cultural Traits; *Data Collection; Language Attitudes; Language Patterns; Language Research; Norms; *Research Methodology; Second Language Learning; *Social Values; *Speech Communication; Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Compliments (Language)

ABSTRACT

A study explored alternative ways of collecting data on cultural values as expressed in speech behaviors. It investigated perceptions of the use of compliments in American English interactions by five Japanese and five American women. Methods of data collection included, first, a questionnaire and then for comparison, interviews using items from the questionnaire. The analysis compared responses to the questionnaire and interviews by the same person, and Japanese with American responses. From the process of evolving an appropriate data collection method it was found that neither observation nor written questionnaires could provide the insights into cultural awareness and values that interviews can. While interviews alone would be insufficient, it is concluded that in combination with the other forms of data collection, they can be very informative. In addition, interviews can provide valuable data on pragmatics because speakers may have dual competence but choose to use home culture values as the basis for their performance. A 15-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Cultural expression in speech behavior: Methods of inquiry

Ruth Benander

In the following paper, Benander's and Nessa Wolfson's work is based on the idea that the values governing appropriateness of particular speech behaviors are culturally specific. In the process of learning a new language, a person may or may not learn the social appropriateness of particular words and phrases. Conversely, a person may learn what she believes are the norms of the new language and culture, but choose not to be guided by them in the performance of a given speech behavior.

Introduction

For the purposes of this research, we operationally define cultural values and speech behavior as follows: cultural values include beliefs concerning what is appropriate as an assessment of another member of the speech community (Wolfson, 1989). The variables of appropriateness in this study are age, sex, and social status. Speech behavior is a cluster of speech acts, and as such, has culturally specific expectations for speech community members. These expectations include where and when the speech behavior may occur and what its specific features are. A given speech behavior is defined according to the speakers' intention, and the effect the speech behavior has on the addressee (Crystal, 1985).

This research, in addition to examining values in reference to specific speech behavior, has been conducted in order to design a particular research strategy; one which can account for the acquisition and interpretation of new cultural norms by second language learners in the process of acquiring their new language. Therefore, this paper describes an exploratory study which I conducted with Wolfson that tests alternative ways to collect data on cultural values as they are expressed in speech behaviors. This study addresses several questions. First, how much does a person learn about cultural appropriateness in learning to perform the speech behaviors of

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the local community? Second, if a person does learn the new models of appropriateness, will she choose to use them? Third, how can SLA researchers collect data that will provide answers to these questions?

I will outline the process of refining a method for collecting data on norms of appropriateness, or cultural values, expressed in speech behaviors. I will also discuss the differences between the data collected from written questionnaires and interviews. Finally, I will suggest how this kind of research can inform what we choose to teach and what second language teachers can expect their students to use from what they are taught.

Within the field of TESOL there has been a lot of sociolinguistic description using two main methods for data collection: observation of what people actually say (Beebe, 1985; Herbert, 1986; Manes, 1983; Wolfson and Manes, 1980), and discourse completion tests to elicit what people think they should say (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). These methods are useful for describing speech behavior, but these methods are not adequate for investigating a speaker's awareness of the situational appropriateness of her language use (Hymes, 1983).

Observation provides excellent data on performance. It describes what people do; there can be no argument with the validity of this kind of data. However, it does not give us direct access to the values held by members of a given community. While the researcher can infer from context and structure what the interaction meant to the person, the data is still only behavioral data, and any statements of emic meaning can only be inferential.

Written questionnaires elicit what a speaker thinks should happen in a given circumstance and thus is one way to try to understand what cultural norms a speaker feels are appropriate. Questionnaires as tools of inquiry are focused and yield a lot of data in a short time (Beebe, 1985). Allowing the person to think about the situation and purposefully write down what they think is right should allow the person to express her knowledge without the pressures of instant communication that interfere with actual performance. However, as has been pointed out elsewhere (Wolfson, 1989; Beebe, 1985), the questionnaire is actually limited by virtue of the written medium in terms of style and space.

The expedient answer to complaints about the limitations of a written questionnaire is that the researcher would do more ethnographic observation to add depth to the written data. However, a focused questionnaire combined with observations still lacks some information that will illuminate the process a person goes through each time she must negotiate an interaction and reinterpret cultural rules

anew for each situation and interlocutor. I suggest that interviews can provide the additional information that questionnaires and observation miss.

In sociolinguistics the interview is sometimes criticized in that it is such an artificial setting that no natural language can ever be gathered (Moreman, 1988). However, as with both questionnaires and observation, if you ask the right kinds of questions, you will be able to use the data obtained from interviews. This method of gathering data cannot replace observation for the collection of actual behavior, but it does provide the performers perceptions which may differ radically from her observed performance.

The advantage of the interview situation is that it does not require the participant to alternate channels from spoken to written. The focus of the interview can be as tight as that of a questionnaire, but the participant can guide the conversation to highlight what is important to her. The researcher can present controlled situations, but the participant can elaborate on all the options that occur to her and not limit herself to the one response that she thinks might be right. During an interview, the participant has more freedom to respond to the situations the researcher presents; she has the opportunity to explain why she understands each situation the way she does. Although it is true that the personal interview is more time consuming, once this information is gathered, the interview data would be richer and more useful for beginning to answer questions of cultural interpretation. Of course it is imperative that the interview be conducted with the proper rigor and the acknowledgement that the interview itself is a specific speech event.

The Study

In order to focus our inquiry into cultural values, we chose to look at compliments. We chose compliments because their structure has been extensively described not only for several dialects of English (Holmes, 1985) (Wolfson, 1989) but also for Polish (Herbert, 1986), Spanish (Valdez and Pino, 1981) and Japanese (Daikuhara, 1986). The availability of detailed description and cross-cultural data makes this particular speech behavior a good candidate for deeper cultural research. Compliments are positive assessments. Who has the right to judge who, and just what these people are allowed to judge, highlights relative social status. Many utterances have a surface structure that looks like a positive assessment, but due to context are interpreted as negative assessments, even if the addresser might have intended for

the utterance to be a compliment. For example, a passenger might comment to the driver of the car, "What a lovely red light you just drove through."

In this initial study, Japanese women and American women judged compliments gathered from observations of American English interactions. The decision to contrast English with Japanese speakers was based on the known information that many norms of complimenting behavior differ between Japanese and English (Daikuhara, 1986).

In the interest of obtaining a large amount of focused data in a short time, we used a written questionnaire. Since we were not interested in speakers' performances, we decided not to use a discourse completion test. Instead, we created a "context completion and evaluation test" to try to get at judgements of appropriateness and cultural values. In this questionnaire, we provided 10 short dialogues taken from observed interactions and asked the participant to write down what the situation would be and whether what the people said to each other was "nice'. We asked participants to identify the sex, age and relationship of the people in each dialog. We chose the word "nice" since it had vague semantic value that connoted positive assessment and/or appropriateness. We hoped that the purposefully vague nature of the word would help the participant feel unrestricted in which judgement she chose to focus on. The native speakers of English did, in fact, make a distinction between appropriate and positive assessment, but the native speakers of Japanese did not.

Upon administering the questionnaire, we discovered several problems. Several respondents reported that they felt that writing the answers was too hard since there were situations where the compliment was appropriate and others where it was inappropriate. In a brief initial interview, one Japanese woman made the astute observation that she felt very inhibited writing her answers in her second language and felt she could not adequately express the intricate nuances of each situation due to space limitations. In the written responses, another Japanese woman made a semantic distinction concerning having something done for one vs.. doing a job herself that was far from clear in her written response.

Frustrated again by the limitations of a written questionnaire we reconsidered how to ask our questions. The major limitation of the questionnaire was the constraint imposed by the written form. In order to avoid restricting the type or amount of information the respondent could give, Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) administered a questionnaire verbally in their work on expressions of gratitude. Building on Eisenstein and Bodman's idea of presenting the questionnaire verbally, we used our

questionnaire as the basis for a discussion with a participant. We hoped that discussing the questionnaire would allow the respondent to elaborate on her ideas, and allow negotiation with the interviewer to overcome linguistic problems. Turning the questionnaire into a conversation allowed the researcher to clarify any confusion the respondent might have with vague terminology and still allow her to freely express herself. A conversation would also allow a bi-cultural person to elaborate on the different ways she understands a situation and express her dual competence and her ability (or inability) to switch from one set of cultural values to another. (The many cautions of this kind of interview are expertly outlined in Briggs, 1986; and Spradley, 1979).

We received written questionnaires from 3 Japanese women who had lived in the U.S. for under six months, and 3 written questionnaires from American English speaking women of the same age. We interviewed 5 Japanese women and 5 American women using the questions from the written questionnaire as the basis for the discussion. Our analysis a) compared written responses to interview responses; and b) American responses to Japanese responses. Our observations based on this data are not intended to be definitive conclusions concerning cultural beliefs; rather, we want our observations to evaluate the utility of this method of research for the study of pragmatics and its applications to pedagogy.

In comparing the Japanese written and spoken data we found the predicted result: the spoken answers were longer, more elaborate, and included much more variety than the written answers. The interviews also included anecdotes concerning actual experiences the respondents had relating to the dialog in question. During a discussion of the following dialog, a Japanese woman recounted how she discovered the situation where "That's a good question" was not a compliment.

Dialog #1

A: Very good question. I'm glad you asked it. You're really thinking.
B: (embarrassed smile)

The respondent mentioned that the first few times she heard her professor say this to her after she asked a question in class, she thought the professor was complimenting her English. She then thought he was complimenting her question. After several weeks she realized that this phrase was a conversation filler that the professor used when he needed time to think. As shown by this example, the interview data had the

benefit of depth, specificity, alternative interpretations, and the opportunity to learn how the respondent came to interpret new information.

The most interesting comparison of written and spoken data came from comparing the written questionnaire and interview of the same person. This comparison only emphasized the observations already made. For example, the following dialog could have several interpretations but this fact only came through in the interview situation.

Dialog #2

A: Hi
B: Hi
A: you look very ***
B: I beg your pardon?
A: You look very professional and businesslike.
B: (laughs)

Several Japanese women we interviewed pointed out that if A were referring to B's personality, then this is not a positive assessment of B insinuating that B is cold and unfriendly. If A were referring to B's clothing, then the remark could be a positive assessment on A's part whether B chose to interpret it that way or not. In the questionnaires, the respondents had only written down the positive assessment of clothing as the context for this interaction.

Anecdotes also highlighted sharp contrasts between American interpretations of the situations and the Japanese interpretations.
The following situation was a case in point:

Dialog #3

A: Your hair! I really like it.
B: You don't think it's too short?
A: No, it looks just fine.
B: I'm just not used to it yet. Do you really like it?
A: Yeah, it looks fine.

The Japanese respondent said that this conversation was perfect. It was one of the paradigms she learned in the conversational strategies class that she attended, and was recommended because B leaves each turn open to continue the conversation. The American women, in both written and spoken format, indicated that they felt that B was inappropriately fishing for compliments and would probably be annoying A.

Another sharp difference in interpretation occurred with the following conversation:

Dialog #4

A: What school are you in?
B: Wharton.
A: Oh, you're really smart.
B: Thank you. That is a really tough school.

The Japanese respondents judged this conversation to be fine if it were between friends. If it happened between acquaintances, B would be rude from being too proud, but A would be fine. The Americans judged both speakers very harshly even if they were friends interpreting A to be "stupid," or "an airhead" while B is suggested to be "arrogant," "conceited" or "a jerk."

Another difference between the Japanese interpretations of the compliments and the American interpretations was that the Americans focused more on the negative use of speech acts which appeared to be compliments on the surface. In every case, the Americans pointed out how the apparent compliment could be interpreted by the addressee as either inappropriate or unpleasant as well as appropriate and pleasant. Two of the Japanese women commented on how this situation might be true in one or two cases, but did not recognise the variability of the compliments meaning nearly as often as the American respondents.

Americans focused on the fact that a person creates an impression of her personality by what kind of compliments she gives and how she responds to complimenting. The Japanese women focused more on how a person responds, valuing deference to the complimenter. In contrast, the American women felt that being rude was appropriate if the compliment was not interpreted as a positive assessment but instead as a joke, or a come on. For example, judgements of appropriateness differed for the following conversation:

Dialog #5

A: You smell so good. What perfume are you wearing?
B: (no answer)

The American women claimed that B's response is appropriate (though not nice) if A's relationship to B is inappropriate for such a comment (stranger, older, using utterance

as a pick-up line). The Japanese women insisted that B does not have the option of not responding. She must respond even if to tell A that she is annoyed.

In terms of similarities, both Japanese and American woman felt that anything was okay if it was between close friends. Most of the American and Japanese women judged the compliments to be given from women, and if men were interpreted as giving many of the compliments, the respondent suggested they would be marginal men. The most striking information that came from the interview data that did not show up in observation nor in the questionnaires, was the issue of knowledge vs. use of new cultural norms. The Japanese respondents commented frequently "This is the way an American would do it, but I would do it less directly", or "Americans wouldn't just smile. They would say something even if its not so good. But I always do that: smile." In many cases the Japanese women appear to be aware of the American norms (supported by the American women's responses), but choose the Japanese behavior especially in the cases of responding to compliments. Here we see the performance of speech behavior serving as a form of cultural boundary maintenance.

Conclusion

This paper outlines the evolution of a method that can help researchers learn more about a speakers cultural awareness and values. Neither observation nor written questionnaires can provide the insights that interviews can. Of course interviews alone are insufficient, but used in combination with observations and perhaps questionnaires, they can be very informative.

Interviews also provide valuable data in the study of pragmatics since it suggests that speakers can have dual competence, but may choose to use the values of their home culture as the basis of their performance. These personal experiences will be an inherent part of how a learner internalizes the new culture and presents herself in the language of the community.

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